

Cross-generational relationships: using a 'Continuum of Volition' in HIV prevention work among young people

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Recognising the link between HIV infection in adolescents – especially girls – and cross-generational relationships, Save the Children has been working with local partners to develop locally appropriate strategies that help to protect girls and to foster their ability to ensure the safety of these relationships, or to enable them to make alternative choices. This article addresses youth, gender and HIV/AIDS prevention in Malawi. It describes the 'Continuum of Volition' developed by Save the Children as an explanatory model to help understand the motivations of young women for engaging in cross-generational relationships, as well as to guide the development of appropriate intervention strategies.

Although globally more men than women are infected with HIV/AIDS, in sub-Saharan Africa women outnumber men; 57 per cent of people infected are women. The gap between male and female infection rates has increased over time (UNAIDS 2004). The epidemic is further concentrated among young people, with the gender gap widening in this group. Young people aged between 15 and 24 represent half of all new HIV infections. In sub-Saharan Africa, young women are two and a half to three times more likely to contract the virus than young men (UNAIDS *et al.* 2004), and 76 per cent of young people infected are female (UNAIDS and WHO 2004). In the region, infection rates for women peak at the age of 25, ten to 15 years younger than the peak for men (UNFPA 2003).

The increasing numbers of young women infected with HIV/AIDS in the sub-Saharan African region are leading development organisations to focus on the issue of cross-generational relationships (in this case mainly relationships between young women and older men) as a significant factor in spreading HIV.¹ To date, this issue has not been sufficiently addressed in prevention programming. Instead, there is increased focus on 'ABC' messaging (abstain, be faithful, use condoms) in prevention work. With strong evidence of the vulnerability of young women to HIV/AIDS, there is an urgent

need to understand better the norms and social dynamics that drive the trend of cross-generational relationships in epidemic spread.

This article explores kinds of development work that might better address young women's motivations in conducting cross-generational relationships, and enable us to understand the context surrounding these relationships. Using the experience of Save the Children in Malawi, it examines the usefulness of an analysis tool designed to understand and respond to the needs and motivations of these young women.^{2, 3} The article starts by providing a brief overview of the context in which young women live, as well as a description of their relationships. It then goes on to describe a project in Malawi that is using an explanatory model of cross-generational relationships, which has been developed into a programme planning tool. Finally, the article assesses the effectiveness of this tool for developing appropriate development programmes to support young women, given the realities of their lives.

The current context

It is clear that in sub-Saharan Africa, many young women are at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum (Hallman 2004), and it is well documented that there are more women living in poverty than men. Estimates suggest that two thirds of the poorest people within sub-Saharan Africa are women (Topouzis 1990). Coupled with gendered poverty is the prevalence of poverty among young people. Research suggests that young people's experiences, contexts and attitudes are distinct from those of adults (Population Council and International Center for Research on Women 2000). Young people are, to differing degrees, governed by external structures that determine the choices they have available to them and influence their preferred outcomes. Age often limits their ability to seek formal employment, to own land, to receive financial credit, and to access other livelihood assets, yet expectations and the need for young people to contribute to family livelihoods make them more vulnerable to poverty and exploitation. As indicated by the *World Youth Report* (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2004), it is estimated that 19.8 per cent of all young people in sub-Saharan Africa today live on less than \$1 day and 39.3 per cent of young people are classified as undernourished. Although statistics disaggregated by gender are unavailable, data on youth poverty together with the gender discrepancies indicated above suggest the significantly disadvantaged position of young women in sub-Saharan Africa.

The socioeconomic context in which these young women are living is also heavily influenced by globalisation and the materialistic culture it brings with it (Hallman 2004). The 'Four Cs' (Cash, Cars, Cell phones and Clothes), VVV (*Voiture, Villa, Virement* or Car, House and Money) and other luxury consumer items like make-up, alcohol and fast food are coveted by many young women, and the ease and speed with which these items are transported and marketed worldwide has made them popular

among young women in sub-Saharan Africa as well (Meekers and Calvés 1997; the Secretary-General's Task Force on Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa 2004. As noted by the *World Youth Report* (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2004, 298):

The problem, especially in developing countries, is that the images of consumerism are everywhere, but many have to be satisfied with the promise of what could be, as the advertised items and lifestyles are not always accessible, particularly to the poorer members of society. The global culture has become a fundamental building block in many young people's lives. However, their relationship with it is very fragile because youth, more than any other group, are exposed to and have come to rely on the global consumer culture, but probably have the fewest resources and the most to lose should global culture not provide the satisfaction they demand of it.

Cultural globalisation, coupled with peer pressure to participate in it, leads many young women to identify themselves as poor because their asset base does not allow them to produce a livelihood that affords these luxury items. As indicated by Collins and Rau (2000, 14), '[t]oday's globalised consumerist culture surely makes untold numbers of people acutely aware of their *relative* poverty'. The spread of luxury producer goods has assisted in shaping the aspirations of young women. This contributes to their own awareness of the inequality in their society, and their relative poverty.

HIV infection rates suggest that some young women may respond to these pressures and others by engaging in sexual relationships with older men. Clearly, these cross-generational relationships are not the only factor contributing to high infection rates among young women. Traditional and social practices such as early marriage, norms for early childbearing, wife cleansing, as well as migration, participation in the sex trade and physiological differences contribute to young women's susceptibility to HIV/AIDS. This article will primarily focus on these cross-generational relationships as a factor in this susceptibility and, moreover, the challenges and complexities they pose for successful strategies to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Cross-generational relationships

Due to the sensitive nature of this issue, data on cross-generational relationships are difficult to obtain. However, as the importance of this topic unfolds, more research is being generated. In rural Zimbabwe, Gregson *et al.* (2002) discovered that young women were more likely to form relationships with men five to ten years older than themselves, as opposed to young men who generally form relationships with women of similar ages. In Zimbabwe, the 2002 Young Adult Survey reported that more than half of all young women reported having their first sexual encounter with a man at least five years older (Secretary-General's Task Force on Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa 2004). This is also reflected in young married women; studies

indicate that many young women marry men who are ten or more years older (Bankole *et al.* 2004).

As Luke and Kurz (2002) have indicated, once in this relationship young women have limited power over sexual activity.⁴ They found that with every year between partners there is a three per cent reduction in condom use. Similarly, in their study in Manicaland, Zimbabwe, Gregson *et al.* (2002) found that condoms are rarely used in cross-generational relationships. They suggest that older men do not want to incur the expense and believe that young women are not as likely to be infected with HIV/AIDS. Gregson *et al.* (2002, 1900) also note that some young women 'are not in a position to insist as they stand to lose economic benefits'.

Due to limited condom use, young women are more likely to contract HIV/AIDS through these relationships. In Zimbabwe, Gregson *et al.* (2002) found that older employed men aged 19–28 (four to nine years older than 15–19-year-old young women in the study) were more likely to be HIV positive. This is largely because they have had more time to be exposed to sexual activity, and in being economically secure, they are more likely to have visited a commercial sex worker (Hallman 2004). Thus, with limited power to negotiate safer sex, young women are increasingly susceptible to HIV/AIDS as, statistically, older men are more likely to be infected with the virus than younger men (Luke 2004; Summers *et al.* 2002).

Recent literature indicates that young women are engaging in these relationships with older men for a variety of reasons. In a review of literature, Luke and Kurz (2002) identified two portrayals of young women and their sexual experiences: one is that young women are passive victims who are compelled into having sexual relations, and the second is that young women are aware of their behaviour and relationships. As described below, organisations like Save the Children have found it necessary to understand the context and rationale for young women to engage in these relationships in order to respond effectively. In this regard, Save the Children has developed an analytical model designed as a programme planning tool.

Understanding and explaining cross-generational relationships

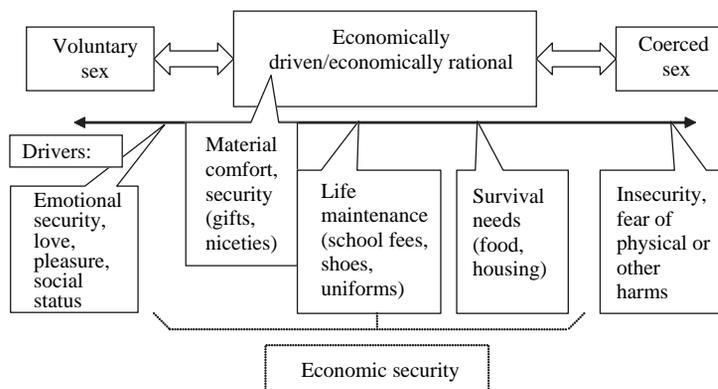
As a child-focused agency that seeks to protect children and young people, as well as to protect their rights, Save the Children struggles to balance the mandate to 'protect children' with the need to protect the *rights of children* to make their own decisions about their sexual activity. Given this, as the issue of cross-generational relationships was gaining momentum and was being framed as a 'problem' by colleague agencies, staff found themselves uncomfortable with the judgement inherent in the framing of the issue. This dilemma led to a number of questions:

- Why do unmarried young women engage in these cross-generational relationships?
- Are these relationships inherently harmful? And what about them is harmful?
- Is there an age at which the age difference ceases to matter or matters less?
- Is it the size of the age difference that is important?
- Is it the age of the girl or young woman (or boy/young man) involved in the practice?
- Is it always wrong? Could there be cases where it might *not* be wrong?

In thinking further about this issue, Save the Children realised that certain assumptions would guide a programmatic response:

- 1 Young people do not always have the power to use the behaviours they know are protective; therefore, a norm where protective practices are expected and allowed must be created.
- 2 Adolescent girls are the keepers of the definition of the issue and the solution. Learning from them in each context about their feelings, experiences, needs and beliefs will ensure the identification of effective responses.
- 3 Public dialogue and peer pressure can create demand for change. Making customs, barriers, biases, and other obstacles more visible leads to a recognition that these issues exist and might require change.
- 4 Although economic resources can come into play in any relationship, there are social and other gains from personal and sexual relationships and these may not be economically driven. We need to understand what those needs/gains are in order to develop specific strategies for change.
- 5 Men are not the only keepers of the norm. In customs like early marriage and childbearing, and female genital cutting, mothers and mothers-in-law play a key role, reinforcing the importance of involving influential women in designing programmatic responses.
- 6 There is no villain. It is important not to label men as predators because social norms permit the behaviour. Similarly, it is important not to make men the enemy and assume that girls and boys are only victims, as some might play a willing or even conducive role in perpetuating the practices.

Figure 1: Reasons/drivers for sexual activity along a Continuum of Volition



7 Gender socialisation plays a critical role in forming social norms. Boys often learn harmful practices and manhood is often defined by these practices, while girls sometimes learn to see their value in relation to their ability to attract a valuable partner. Harmful practices can be changed by altering the way boys and young girls are brought up and come to identify themselves as men and women. This is why reaching girls and boys at a young age is important to enable them consciously to choose their actions or beliefs.

These questions and assumptions led staff to reframe the issue. From Save the Children's perspective, cross-generational relationships fall along a Continuum of Volition. As Figure 1 reflects, Save the Children views the factors that support and sustain cross-generational relationships as ranging along a continuum. They include emotional security, material comfort and financial security, life maintenance, survival security, and coercion/physical insecurity. This continuum suggests that we should not consider all young people as vulnerable and passive when they are involved in sexual relationships with persons who are older or more powerful. Rather, there are empowered young people who choose to engage in sexual relationships with older people for emotional security, such as sex for pleasure, sex as part of a love relationship, or potentially to demonstrate fertility and/or bear a child. In the middle of the continuum is what Save the Children refers to as 'economically rational sex', which is neither strictly voluntary nor involuntary. This ranges from sex for 'desired things', such as clothes, passing grades, cash for school fees, housing, etc., to 'survival sex'. On the far right of the continuum is sex that creates insecurity, fear, or harm – coerced sex.

Save the Children considers that the different forms of sexual relationship in which young people are engaged require different responses to prevent HIV/AIDS infection.

For instance, if a young person is voluntarily in a relationship with an older person, or someone their own age, for emotional gains or security, an appropriate response is to help make that relationship safe and the practices protective. Alternatively, if a young person is forced into a sexual relationship with an older person, or someone their own age, an appropriate response is to influence social norms that allow coercion, as well as to ensure protection.

Save the Children's adolescent health programmes have focused tremendous effort on ensuring that young people have the information, skills and services needed to make healthy and responsible sexual choices. The agency has also paid great attention to creating supportive social and policy environments for adolescents to carry out their decisions. Save the Children has also recognised that young people who engage in survival sex need alternative economic options. Perhaps most difficult to address programmatically were the young people who engaged in sexual relationships for 'desired things'.

Save the Children's adolescent health project in Mangochi District, Malawi

To test our analytical model of the continuum, and to identify appropriate responses for the various scenarios along the continuum, Save the Children began work in Mangochi District, Malawi, through an adolescent health project where anecdotal evidence suggested cross-generational relationships were relatively common and a significant contributor to HIV/AIDS transmission.

Discussions with unmarried girls and young women tested how the model described the different stages along the continuum, illuminated the range of local beliefs and practices, and helped to identify ways to respond programmatically along the continuum. Save the Children facilitated eight focus groups of ten to 12 girls and young women between the ages of 14 and 17 and six groups of five to eight men. The young women believed that approximately half of their unmarried peers between the ages of 15 and 20 engage in cross-generational relationships. The men in these relationships were reported to be any man with money or a profession, including teachers, businessmen, itinerant labourers and fishermen. Some men offer cash while others give gifts such as shoes, a dress, a soft drink. Teachers may give students good grades. These practices were reported to be more common in the lakeshore area, where roads and the lake itself enable men to earn cash and travel.

Young women described a variety of situations that made different motivations along the continuum seem rational. Young women reported that some peers are coerced into sex with older men who have physical power or status, such as teachers. Although these young women stated that they know how to refuse men, they do not

always feel safe doing so for fear of reprisal through physical violence, loss of gifts, or poor marks in school in the case of teachers.

At the other end of the continuum, young women reported that some peers engage in sex with older men for the pleasure or habit of it. Some said that love might result from such relationships, but that it is rare.

Young women in all groups believed that the great majority of relationships fall in the centre of the continuum; most young women are motivated by some kind of economic security need or gain. They felt that some peers use the relationships for basic survival, but more engage in cross-generational relationships to get things or favours that they desire. Two groups of young women said that even if a girl starts in a relationship at either end of the continuum, they often end up in the centre because they come to appreciate the things or gifts and return willingly. As a 16-year-old young woman described:

'Sometimes a girl can go into a relationship against her will, but then after some time she can accept the situation and start to feel as if she had come into it on her own free will. Thus, the girl will not report the issue to any friends for fear that a friend will start a relationship with the man.'

Most young women believed that sex with older men is shameful and immoral. Consequently, young women generally feel that it is a problem and want alternative ways to earn money. They also asked for systems to report and punish the men.

When asked about cross-generational relationships, men overwhelmingly agreed that they are widespread but shameful. They understood how they can be harmful to young women and to men. As one man summarized, 'They [girls] just spoil their lives with this kind of behaviour' and may become pregnant or contract sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS. Risks to men that the groups discussed, if discovered, included being beaten by the family of the girl, ruining their marriage, breaking societal taboos, and damaging girls' genitals.

Most of the men thought that young women engage in the practice willingly, primarily for money and gifts. As one teacher described, 'Girls admire their friends when they buy good things using money that they get from men'. Reasons that they felt men chose to engage in cross-generational relationships were more varied, but all agreed that girls are 'easy' and 'demand less money' than women. A teacher explained:

'Girls are easy-going. Their reasoning capacity is very low so men can take them easily unlike the other women who have experienced a lot of things and challenge the men.'

Some men felt that young women are physically more satisfying than older women. Most men also said that they believe that girls are less likely to be infected with HIV/AIDS.

Table 1: Programme planning tool to understand effective options to address cross-generational relationships

Driving motivation Programmatic options	<i>Emotional security</i>	<i>Economically driven/ desired things</i>	<i>Economic and physical survival</i>	<i>Coercion (due to insecurity)</i>
Emotional support/ praise for refusals	X	X		
Training in alternative income-generation	X	X	X	
Life skills education	X	X		X
Parental/elder support and communication	X	X		X
Community protection and reporting system		X		X

All men asserted that it should stop and attributed it to 'other men' unlike themselves. However, none had ideas about how to stop the practice. Many put the onus on parents. As a fisherman said, 'Parents are supposed to advise their children.' A few suggested that outsiders who are respected and important people could visit the communities and explain the issue to people.

In contrast, young women who participated in designing solutions to protect themselves proposed strategic approaches according to their place on the continuum (Table 1).

Young women tested several of the proposed strategies using a consultative research technique called Trials of Improved Practices, (TIPs), including praising themselves for refusing unequal sexual relationships, drawing on support and communication with elders, and participating in training in income-generation.⁵

Fifteen girls agreed to try refusing men by praising themselves after each refusal. Young women preferred to praise themselves rather than receiving praise from another person such as a peer or a concerned adult. Young women used a sheet with half-completed smiley faces in boxes. After each refusal, girls would complete a face to reward themselves. During the first visit, the researcher asked each of the girls what they would say to a man to refuse and what to do if problems arose. Young women had many ideas of how to refuse men, such as, 'I will report you to my mother', or 'You are of the age of my father', or 'Respect yourself.' After three weeks, young women reported a range of propositions from older men ranging from none by one girl, to eight by others. Thirteen of the 15 girls reported refusing all of the advances. Reports corresponded to observation of the reward sheet after the interviews. Young women said that they now felt good about refusing men. As one described, 'Refusing

older men is easy because now I know what to say, and I have learned that I can do anything, even refuse these people.' In one community, participating girls incorporated the names of men who propositioned them in songs at night, and reported no disturbance again from those men.

Another 14 young women agreed to try seeking support from a respected community elder: an 'auntie'. Aunties were older women identified by their communities as respected, confidential and kind. These young women also practised what to say to refuse and what to do in case of problems. They met the aunties and discussed when and how they could get support. After three weeks, only four young women reported using the aunties. These four were the youngest ones, all aged 14 or 15. These younger women each visited the aunties after each proposition by men and liked having their support. As one young woman explained, 'Before, men's intimidation of me made me unable to refuse their advances, but now the auntie gives me confidence to refuse.' The aunties counselled the young women and visited the men to tell them to stop the harassment. In one case, the auntie discussed the matter with the young woman's parents, and took them to confront the man. The four young women asked to continue to visit the aunties, and requested that their friends be allowed to visit as well.

Twelve young women participated in a short course on alternative income-generation skills. A local professional in revolving loans and small businesses conducted a two-day training on basic business skills including selecting an activity, managing the business and saving money. A peer educator conducted a life skills session on values clarification and goal setting. The researcher interviewed individual participants after the training. Every young woman was enthusiastic about new possibilities. As one participant described:

'This training was one of the best things in my life. I have been thinking about starting a business, so with this training I feel it will be a success. Neither of my parents work . . . it will help me switch from other income-generating activities like sleeping with men, young or old, for money to buy necessities.'

The desire to secure a loan was a concern for young women prior to the training, but, after discussing options for small loans during the course, most realised that they could borrow from relatives or do small piece work to raise start-up capital.

Although young women asked for community protection, community leaders were generally unwilling to establish new systems of reporting or protection. Four communities held meetings to discuss the issue; two felt that cross-generational relationships were not a concern and two others believed that they would not be able to do anything to reduce the practice substantially. An intensive community mobilisation effort is needed to work with key individuals who acknowledge the problem and are willing to take public action. This effort will focus on public sanctions against men who engage in relationships with young women under the age of 18

years, the legal age of adulthood, and male peer leaders who can influence their peers in positive ways to protect young women.

Conclusion

Most studies and programmes related to cross-generational relationships depict them as purely functional. They are described as transactional relationships, in which young women secure a livelihood by using their bodies as 'capital'. This can place them at increased risk of HIV infection. However, Save the Children's continuum suggests that some young women engage in these relationships for emotional reasons. Although not a majority, some young women in Longfield *et al.*'s (2004) study identified the desire for mature partners, surrogate parents, emotional fulfilment and supportive mentors as a reason for participating in cross-generational relationships. These types of relationship are not often focused upon in the literature and, instead, we tend to homogenise relationships that involve gift giving and receiving, such as cross-generational relationships, as purely transactional or abusive and they therefore become demonised. However, this is not always the case.

Although the growing disparity in HIV infection rates between young women and men in sub-Saharan Africa is of great concern, Save the Children hesitates to define a key driver of this disparity – cross-generational relationships – as a problem. Rather, Save the Children proposes that the international community reflects on why it has defined this issue as problematic and what aspects of it are of concern. Cross-generational relationships are occurring all over the world; however, these relationships have been labelled as a particularly significant problem in sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, the high rate of HIV/AIDS in both older men and young women clearly prompts this issue as one of significance in the region. Despite this, these types of relationship are evident in every society. Young women have partners ten years older who may provide them with gifts in many 'Western' societies, and this is not considered problematic. This is largely because the socio-economic environment in most 'Western' societies provides young women with choices. In most 'Western' societies, cross-generational relationships are only considered problematic when a young woman is considered too young to make her own choices, or the relationship is abusive. These considerations are determined by the society.

This suggests that, rather than defining cross-generational relationships as inherently problematic, it is important to understand the choices (or lack of choices) that young women have in their own communities. These concerns of inequality within the socio-economic context then need to be addressed in HIV prevention work. The Continuum of Volition developed by Save the Children therefore becomes an important tool for identifying and assessing young women's experience as well as the context in which they live. Moreover, by engaging young women in the process from the beginning, this tool helps to identify interventions that meet the diverse needs of

young women and therefore results in the design and implementation of more relevant and effective HIV/AIDS prevention strategies. By engaging young women in this process, the rationale behind their decision-making becomes evident; this, in turn, enables interventions to be tailored to their specific needs.

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Notes

- 1 A cross-generational relationship is defined as a non-marital sexual relationship between an adult and a young person, with an age difference of at least ten years. This may or may not include a transactional component. While the ten-year age difference may exclude relationships between adults and children or adolescents of a smaller age difference by strict definition, it is used in this article for lack of a more accurate term.
- 2 Save the Children Federation, Inc. is a child-focused United States-based non-government, non-sectarian, non-partisan, relief and development organisation. Save

the Children US is part of a global alliance of Save the Children organisations working in more than 140 countries worldwide.

- 3 Although there is limited information on the role of men in this phenomenon, there has been a shift among development partners to include men and boys in gender equality programmes. This follows earlier endeavours to engage men and boys in reproductive health issues.
- 4 Very little research has been conducted in this area. As remarked by MacPhail and Campbell (2001, 1614): 'Understandings of the influences on sexual behaviour and the mechanics of sexual behaviour change are still limited, particularly in the southern African context. Due to these inadequacies in our knowledge, we have limited tools for understanding what is driving the epidemic among young people.'
- 5 TIPs is a consultative research method that involves a series of visits to selected participants to test and refine new practices for people's willingness and ability to do them in their own contexts (Dickin *et al.* 1997).

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